'Super PAC' backing 751 South

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Body

The glossy fliers appearing in Durham mailboxes last week brings local politics into the ***super*** ***PAC*** era on behalf of the controversial ***751*** ***South*** subdivision project.

The fliers – in three versions – endorse incumbent Durham County Commissioners Joe Bowser, Brenda Howerton and Michael Page, and aspiring commissioner Rickey Padgett in the May 8 primary election. All four support the 1,300-home mixed-use project in southwest Durham County near Jordan Lake.

The fliers, 6 inches by 11 inches, were paid for by The Durham Partnership for Progress, which filed April 13 with the Durham County Board of Elections as an "independent expenditure political committee" – aka ***super*** ***PAC***.

"I am disappointed that a ***super*** ***PAC*** led by someone who does not live in Durham (and) can spend unlimited corporate money has decided to endorse and promote candidates" in Durham, said Commissioner Ellen Reckhow, who is running for re-election and opposes the development.

The Partnership for Progress's treasurer is Rhonda Hall Sisk of 9222 N.C. ***751***, a residence owned by ***Southern*** Durham Development at the ***751*** ***South*** site that is also the company's registered office. The assistant treasurer is Tyler Morris of Raleigh, a partner in ***Southern*** Durham Development.

The filing forms list a $100 cash donation from ***Southern*** Durham Development, as well as the company's in-kind contribution of $2,500 for services of Public Policy Polling, a Raleigh opinion-survey firm.

"I'm just a bit amazed at how far the ***751*** folks are willing to go to get their way," said Will Wilson, a commissioner candidate who opposes the project.

Alex Mitchell, a Durham resident who is president of ***Southern*** Durham Development, said in 2010 that he would "do everything within my power, legally, to move (***751*** ***South***) forward."

County Commissioners approved a critical rezoning for ***751*** ***South*** in 2010. Their vote led to a lawsuit by project opponents, who claimed their protest petition against the rezoning was improperly ruled invalid.

That suit was dismissed in Superior Court in January, but ***Southern*** Durham Development has applied for a re-rezoning that removes some restrictions in the original. The new rezoning is under administrative review, and the decision on its approval could be up to the commissioners elected this year.

Project opponents, Mitchell has said, "wake up every day trying to think of ways to block this plan." His announcement of the partnership's formation alluded to "an alternate political action committee" that has made opposition to ***751*** ***South*** "their primary election issue."

The Durham People's Alliance endorsed four candidates who oppose the project – Reckhow, Wilson, Fred Foster Jr. and Wendy Jacobs – and listed candidates' positions on the project among the factors considered in making its endorsements.

The People's Alliance has mailed out a full-color endorsement flier of its own. Spokeswoman Kate Fellman said the mailing was planned before Partnership for Progress's mailing appeared.

"I believe Durham voters will trust our PA endorsements, as they are made by hundreds of their fellow citizens with Durham's best interest at heart, rather than an outside group looking to make a profit," Fellman said.

Elections Director Michael Perry said the Partnership for Progress is the first ***super*** ***PAC*** established in Durham County.

A ***super*** ***PAC*** must certify that it will not, directly or indirectly, make contributions to candidate committees or other committees that make contributions to candidates, and it cannot coordinate with candidate committees. It can accept unlimited contributions and make unlimited independent expenditures – meaning there is no limit on how much ***Southern*** Durham Development or any other donor can contribute and spend to advance its interests.

Fourteen candidates are running for election to the five seats on the Durham County Board of Commissioners May 8.

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